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XII. LIFE CYCLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Conception

842 The Tanala do not believe that conception is possible without intercourse, but the average individual's ideas of the mechanics of conception are rather vague. It is plain that they have not thought much about it. The wisest say that the child is formed from the blood of the parents. The semen, which is regarded as a form of blood, mingles with the blood of the mother at her next menstrual 843 period and coagulates it. The clot is added to monthly and the foetus gradually takes shape from it. The eyes are the first parts to take recognizable form, appearing in the second or third month. The period of gestation seems to be rather accurately known.

842 The Imerina and Betsileo, who held similar beliefs regarding the formation of the foetus, did not understand that intercourse was necessary. They did not believe that a virgin could bear a child, but held that the first intercourse began the process of child bearing and that after this a normal woman would continue to bear children at fairly regular intervals without male intervention. This idea was held so strongly that children born to an unmarried widow several years after her husband's death were accounted his actual children and shared equally in his property.

843 Intercourse continues during the early stages of pregnancy, but there seem to be no special rules governing it. It is not considered necessary to the growth of the foetus. Abortion may sometimes be practiced by unmarried mothers, but the natives are reticent in regard to it and I could not learn the methods. It is certainly rare.

842 Sterility was formerly rare, but is now somewhat on the increase, due to the introduction of venereal diseases. It is commonly thought [164] to be the woman's fault, but if a man marries more than one wife without having children it is recognized that the fault lies with him. The reasons commonly assigned are sexual excess prior to marriage and especially incest. Malevolent sorcery was never mentioned as a cause. It is considered a calamity and *ombiasy* do a thriving business in charms and medicines for its cure.

Pregnancy Taboos

843 During pregnancy both parents are subject to various taboos. The most important one for the husband is that he must not have intercourse with any woman, other than a plural wife, while his wife is

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pregnant. To do so will make delivery more difficult. This rule is 843
strictly observed and infraction entitles the wife to divorce with [586]
alimony. A man who breaks it will be denounced by the village as cruel and bad at heart and is likely to be suspected of sorcery, as in keeping with his general character. In addition, the husband must not cut out the septa of a bamboo to make a water bottle, or the child will have dysentery, or put a handle in an axe, which will give the child a birth mark, or hide a spade, which will give the child a hair lip.

The pregnant woman must not carry ginger root or a variety of bean with a black eye, in the front of her dress. The root will cause the child to suffer from polydactyly, the beans will make it have black spots on its skin. These taboos appear to be common to all the Tanala Menabe, but there are no doubt a number of others peculiar to various gentes.

BIRTH

Among the Tanala Menabe the mother, as soon as labor com- 844
mences, goes to some vacant house in the village ward which belongs to her lineage. If there is none, she goes to her own or her father's dwelling. The doors and windows are shut and no man is allowed to enter. There are a few professional midwives, but these are only called in when delivery is difficult. Usually she is assisted by old female relatives. She removes all her clothing and kneels, grasping a stick or pendant rope. The attendants must not speak until after the afterbirth has been delivered. Then they begin to shout and clap their hands crying, *"Vita, vita!"* ("Finished!") The male relatives have gathered outside the house and when they hear this they begin to clap their hands and sing. In the old days guns would be fired.

The umbilical cord is cut very long and tied up to the child's neck with a string twisted from bark cloth. A male relative of the father takes the placenta and buries it deeply just outside and in front of the door of the birth house.

Immediately after the birth both mother and child are bathed in 846
cold water. A deep, sloping bed of grass is piled up in the southeast corner of the house, between the fireplace and the wall. The mother is laid on this with her head and shoulders high and her legs drawn up. A large fire is built and kept up for eight days and nights. During this time the mother remains on the bed, leaving it only for natural needs. The Tanala can give no reason for this "roasting," which is a widespread Indonesian practice.